

PAUL'S STORY – BORSCHT

My mom was a fabulous cook. Her soup was beyond description, especially her tomato borscht (she always distinguished it from beet or, as she liked to call it, Russian borscht). Growing up, I remember eating borscht every Saturday.

This soup was more than food - it was the essence of community for our family. It represented all the struggles of growing up as refugees - a way to stretch a dollar and use up all those stored and pickled vegetables from the summer garden.

Soup was never eaten alone - it was a family experience with lots of homemade bread and butter. The meal was filled with conversation, debate and planning for the afternoon of work or fun to follow. A bowl of soup not only filled our stomachs but also our souls with the warmth of family, history and community.

I grew up a Mennonite. My parents emigrated from Russia after the Second World War. Borscht was a particularly important soup to us. It was served at church functions, as fundraisers at the relief sale and in just about every Russian Mennonite home in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia.



MSA Museum Photo - Alex Hougen on tractor operating automatic hay baler in Abbotsford. June 8, 1949.

Making borscht involved taking pickled tomatoes, cabbage, carrots and potatoes from the cellar and creating an inexpensive but filling and satisfying meal. The inexpensive part was of particular importance - we used to use the term "cheap as borscht" to describe anything that was full of value and low cost.

So here it is, my Mom's recipe for borscht and the key to the heart of the community I grew up in. This great food has a soul and can tell you more about growing up as a Russian Mennonite than just about any history book.

CABBAGE BORSCHT (Otherwise known as Mennonite soup)

By Elizabeth Born

*2 lbs soup bone (in better times we might have used a low grade roast)
cold water (about half the pot full)
2 carrots - optional
1 small cabbage or half larger one - finely chopped
2 medium potatoes, cubed
1 medium onion
Salt and pepper to taste (1 tsp)
1 - 2 bay leaf
1-2 hot chili peppers (optional)
Small bunch dill - fresh or frozen
Small bunch parsley
2 cups tomatoes
2 tablespoons tomato paste (optional)
1 can tomato soup (optional)*

Method (this is how my mom taught me):

Start with a little prayer (a wish) that this will be the very best soup ever (very important as mom used to blame her failed cooking attempts on a lack of love).

Get a pot large enough to hold the water and meat. (Should be about two-thirds full when the meat is in.) Add the onion whole.

Boil and then simmer the meat and onion for a minimum of 2 hours or all morning. Remove the meat and place on platter to serve with meal - skim off fat.

About an hour before you want to eat add the carrots and potatoes and cook until done.

Now add the cabbage and cook until done to suit your taste. Only at this point should you add the tomatoes, soup and paste - adding these any earlier will impede the cabbage from cooking (don't know why this is just what mom says).

About 20 minutes prior to serving add the dill and parsley - very important to get that rich flavor.

Optional: Serve with the meat and either a tablespoon of sour cream or yogurt.

When eating praise the cook - very important and ensure there is plenty of heartfelt conversation. Fresh bread and buns go very well with this meal.

